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TENSION, DIVISION, AND CHAOS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY  
ON THE IMPACTS OF THE 2020 ELECTION ON BELONGING  
IN WHITE STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education and Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Bailey S. Sauls

May 2021

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Bailey Stewart Sauls

entitled

Tension, Division, and Chaos: A Phenomenological Study on the Impacts of the  
2020 Election on Belonging in White Students and Students of Color

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
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May 2021

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study researched the impacts of the 2020 presidential election on college students' sense of belonging and the differences in impacts between White students and students of color. Belonging is crucial to student experience, and students of color face more barriers to belonging than White students. Additionally, the 2016 presidential election left more lasting negative effects on mental health and student experience than previous elections. These impacts were more directly felt by students of color. In this study ten White students and ten students of color were interviewed about their experiences during the 2020 election. Both groups indicated that the election impacted their campus political climate, relationships, ability to be fully understood on campus, and anticipation of post-election responses. Additionally, students of color indicated the election increased existing issues of belonging, the election results would directly impact them long-term, and their race and politics were linked in ways not present for White students. Findings indicate the 2020 election impacted sense of belonging in all students, and more directly impacted students of color than White students. Findings inform implications for future practices in student development programming. Limitations and implications for future election research are also discussed.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The 2016 presidential election had profound and somewhat unexpected effects on Americans. In many ways, that election is thought to have changed the political landscape and, in turn, the social climate of the nation, ushering in an era of unprecedented fragmentation (Klein, 2020). Many believe that change in political climate was largely sparked by the rhetoric of the Trump campaign, which utilized discriminatory messaging aimed largely at communities of color. Those changes were marked by an increase in prejudice-related and racialized events following the results of the 2016 election described as “the Trump Effect” (Crandall et al. 2018). More broadly, the election results impacted the mental health and well-being of many Americans in ways previous elections had not (Lench et al., 2016; McCarthy & Saks, 2019).

College campuses do not operate within a vacuum, and often political trends, tensions, and effects of elections that occur within the United States are also woven into the social fabric of college and university campuses (Crandall et al. 2018). In 2016, college campuses saw similar divisions, and the election profoundly impacted the student experience. Campuses witnessed increases in demand for mental health services, especially by students who considered Trump’s election as negative (McCarthy & Saks, 2019). In particular, sense of belonging decreased in students of color and other minority groups following discriminatory incidents on campuses after the election (DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Lott & Love, 2019). This research suggests that these trends may have

persisted into the 2020 election, indicating professionals need to understand how elections affect their campuses and their students so they can mediate negative effects on sense of belonging.

### **Race**

Race is often understood as a social demographic of humankind that shares certain distinctive characteristics, interests, or even cultural similarities. Different races have fundamentally different experiences on college campuses, and understanding those differences are vitally important. However, for the purpose of this study, differences in student experience with the 2020 election will be compared between White students and students of color, broadly.

The 2016 election had significant effects on the experiences of students of color on college campuses. Students of color are already at an increased risk for racial discrimination on campuses and decreased student experiences, especially at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019). Students of different racial backgrounds already experience their school and the world differently from one another. Understanding these differences is important to mitigate potential negative experiences.

### **Belonging on Campus**

Sense of belonging is a widely studied psychosocial concept. It can most simply be understood as a perceived inclusion or acceptance as a member in a group, and it is a fundamental basic human need that motivates a great deal of human behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Sense of belonging is stimulated by engaging social relationships and environments and has several positive benefits to one's health and life

outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging is highly influenced by college campus climate because students spend most of their time and create most of their relationships on campus. Thus, fostering a positive sense of belonging often becomes a key goal for student development programming as professionals seek to care for their students.

In general, students of color enter into college at a greater risk for decreased sense of belonging than their White peers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019). Already subjected to discrimination, students of color are more likely to perceive that they do not belong because of their institution's campus racial climate, especially if their institution is predominantly White. These negative experiences may even cause students to drop out (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As a result, higher education professionals pay close attention to campus racial climate and to the ways it impacts sense of belonging in minority students so they can mitigate these problems and create spaces where students feel comfortable and can thrive. Those efforts are especially important during contentious and polarizing events on campus, like presidential elections.

### **The 2020 U.S. Presidential Election**

The 2020 presidential election is broadly defined as the national democratic election between President Donald J. Trump and former Vice President Joseph Biden, and specifically refers to the election for the presidency of the United States. The entire election process can take several years, as both parties go through primary nomination processes, with candidates often announcing their intent to run for the Office of the President as early as two years before the Iowa Caucus.

In the context of higher education, an election season typically refers to fall term of a presidential election year, when students are on campus and participate in voting,

discussions, or other related activities. Therefore, this study focused on the fall semester of the 2020 academic school year and studied the impact of the 2020 election. In the past, elections impacted the culture of the United States, but did not have significant effects on campuses and students. However, the 2016 election may have altered that trend in dramatic ways (Lench et al., 2016). In particular, the 2016 election had significant negative impacts on sense of belonging in students of color, who were more likely to have adverse experiences during the election including increase in racialized events and microaggressions, an increase in isolation, and impaired academic success post-election (Lott & Love, 2019). This study further recorded the effects of presidential elections by focusing on the impact of the election by comparing the sense of belonging of White students and students of color.

### **Conclusion**

In general, the body of literature on the 2016 election shows a vast change in political tension on campuses, leading to increased risk for decreased sense of belonging for students of color (Crandall et al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Lott & Love, 2019). Studying the effects of the 2020 election on student experiences in the context of race offers several benefits to higher education professionals. First, it allows professionals to compare the effects of upcoming elections to previous ones and the ways in which trends from the previous election persisted or developed over four years. Second, it compares how students from different racial backgrounds might be impacted by elections.

Those insights give professionals a better understanding of how elections impact students and campuses while also providing a real-time analysis of the impacts of the

2020 election on students and campuses. Findings ultimately helped identify places where professionals can better care for and support students in the context of presidential elections. The study sought to achieve these goals by asking:

- 1) In what way(s), if any, did the 2020 U.S. presidential election impact students' belonging on their college campus?
- 2) In what way(s), if any, did those experiences differ between White students and students of color?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The political climate of the United States is becoming increasingly divided, and these divisions often become most apparent during presidential elections. Colleges and universities are not immune to this polarization. Thus, college campus climates, and subsequently their students' sense of belonging, can be impacted in significant ways.

Furthermore, students of color already experience their campus climate differently than White students (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hussain & Jones, 2019; Rankin & Reason, 2005), which leads to an increased risk for low belonging and adverse experiences while in school. Political elections, namely the 2016 election, exacerbated these problems (Lott & Love, 2019). Higher education institutions need to better understand how they might be impacted by future political elections in order to better serve their students of color and prepare their campuses and student bodies.

The following literature review looks at research on sense of belonging, particularly emphasizing how it is developed and experienced in people of color. Next, it looks more specifically at the ways campus racial climate impacts the sense of belonging in college students of color. Then, the review of the literature will shift to briefly examine political engagement and elections on college campuses. Finally, the 2016 election and its effects on both the general population and marginalized communities will be examined, setting the stage for the anticipated effects of the 2020 election.

## **Belonging in Students of Color**

Sense of belonging has become a widely studied psychological concept for people of all ages and demographics. In their heavily-cited study, Baumeister and Leary (1995) developed and illustrated the theory that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). This theory points to the need for some sense of belonging as an essential motivator for human behavior and has significant benefits to physical, mental, and emotional health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Developing a sense of belonging is an essential component of the overall student experience. Having a perceived sense of belonging and social support has positive effects on both emotional and mental health (Bolger et al., 2000), and participation in extracurricular activities outside of school helps foster social engagement, increasing the likelihood of retention (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Having a sense of belonging to a student’s academic institution predicts academic success and achievement and provides opportunities for learning (Cohen & Steele, 2002; Mallett et al., 2011; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Conversely, having a lack of social relationships and belonging can have detrimental effects on one’s health and is correlated with both physical health problems and mental health disorders (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000).

College is a time of important transition and growth for young people and for students, and it is crucial that they find means of social engagement in order to thrive on campus (Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1989). Belonging is then influenced by how welcomed students feel in their environment or at their particular institution (Baumeister

& Leary, 1995; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). While most students will face challenges when moving from home to their college campus, students of color, in general, are at a much greater risk for lower sense of belonging than White students because they are subjected to discrimination and racism, especially at PWIs (Hussain & Jones, 2019; Lewis & Shah, 2019). That possibility puts them at greater risk for low academic outcomes and higher attrition (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and for lower emotional health and well-being, negating the positive impacts of having a strong sense of belonging (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Students of color from different ethnic backgrounds experience sense of belonging on their campus differently (Levin et al., 2006), but the difference is most distinctly drawn between White students and students of color.

Sense of belonging is important and a primary motivator for all students, regardless of race. White students with a strong sense of belonging largely see the same benefits as students of color. However, finding ways to increase belonging in students of color is critical especially when one considers they enter into institutions already at a disadvantage (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Further, the way students identify and analyze whether or not they belong is indicative of their campus climate and the resources that they perceive are available to them (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

### **Campus Racial Climate**

Campus racial climate is inextricably linked with sense of belonging. Many studies have shown that perceptions and experiences of campus racial and cultural climate are correlated with sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Mallett et al., 2011). White students and students of color experience campus climate differently, and



students of color are more likely than their White peers to have a negative perception of their campus climate (Ancis et al., 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Students of color are less likely to see themselves represented at PWIs and have to make significant cultural changes in order to adapt, often putting them at a disadvantage (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). This reality, combined with other acts of discrimination, sends signals that they do not belong at their particular school and increases their risk of dropping out (Cabrera et al., 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

People of color already experience discrimination and racism outside of the context of higher education and are impacted on personal and societal levels. They are already put at a disadvantage for worse life outcomes compared to White people because of societal systems of power put in place that already treat them unfairly and discriminate against them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Many students may have already encountered racial discrimination by the time they arrive on campus. Thus, they may enter into their college years more skeptically, and experiences of discrimination may exacerbate existing problems (Lott & Love, 2019).

Students of color are more likely to perceive their campus as unsupportive and even hostile, whether that be through overtly racist acts, comments from those around them, or more subtle ways the institution might provide an unwelcoming environment (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019; Levin et al., 2006). As a result, they are more likely to report feelings of isolation, being underappreciated, and being devalued (Lott & Love, 2019). Students of color are more likely to experience acts of discrimination, bias, and microaggressions, which can decrease overall well-being and positive emotion, increase stress, and reduce their

attachment to their institution (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Lott & Love, 2019). In general, students of color are more likely to be stereotyped and have lower academic expectations placed upon them than their White peers (Cohen & Steele, 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

These experiences can build upon one another and lead to racial battle fatigue, a reality characterized by negative emotions, increased mental health concerns with anxiety and stress, as well as a sense of hopelessness and isolation (Smith et al., 2007). If students perceive their campus climate to be uninviting, they are less likely to be academically and socially committed and may drop out (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Social involvement in students of color often drops after their first year (Levin et al., 2006) and students of color already graduate at lower rates than their White peers (Museus et al., 2018).

However, students' lack of belonging can be mitigated when they have regular interactions with diverse individuals, see themselves represented by faculty, and perceive a commitment on the university's behalf to diversity initiatives (Hussain & Jones, 2019; Museus et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Having a diverse student body is advantageous to the learning experience of all students, especially considering the population of the United States grows increasingly racially diverse each year (Cabrera et al., 1999; Denson & Chang, 2009), and the increase in diversity officers and other faculty on campus at the very least signifies a changing tide in higher education. Campuses can promote the well-being and success of students of color by adopting more antiracist and culturally engaging policies and programs at the institutional level (Arellano & Vue, 2019; Museus et al., 2018). Regardless, many improvements can still be made to campus

climates to ensure students of color are given the same opportunities for success and thriving as White students.

### **Political Engagement and Elections on College Campuses**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a drastic increase in political polarization and division between both professional politicians and members of the general population. There seems to be an increased inability, or unwillingness, to dialogue in productive ways that is detrimental to ourselves and the nation (Klein, 2020).

Students experience presidential elections like the rest of American society, and campuses are not immune to the political climate within which they exist. An important aspect of how students experience elections is their political engagement. Many institutions make it a goal to promote civic engagement in their students (Hoffman, 2015). The effects of political or civic engagement on student experience are varied, but it is generally believed that engaging one another in the world of politics is good and necessary, and promotes better life outcomes and health (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2016). It might also mitigate against negative campus racial climate for students of color (Hope et al., 2018).

In general, the more politically engaged students are, and the more they perceive their campus to be politically engaged, the more equipped they are to handle elections. This proves true for all students regardless of race, but especially for students of color (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Mixed data exist on the effects of previous U.S. presidential elections on college campuses. In general, it is believed that even when people are politically engaged, they are largely unaffected by the campaign and election processes. Some short-term measures

of happiness or sadness may follow election results, but long-term changes in well-being are often insignificant (Lench et al., 2019). Some evidence suggests that the results of President Obama's election in 2008 lead to increased cortisol—a stress hormone—levels in dissenting voters (Stanton et al., 2010). Historically, however, while people might become upset or mad about the results of elections, they are unaffected in more long-term cognitive and emotional capacities (Lench et al., 2019).

### **Impact of the 2016 Election**

The 2016 election process was unprecedented and unexpected in several ways, and a growing body of research has been devoted to understanding the impact it had and continues to have on Americans and society. The 2016 presidential election was the culmination of building political polarization along party lines. Exit polls showed significant division along the lines of race, gender, and education (McCall & Olaff, 2017; Tyson & Maniam, 2016). Voter breakdown along these lines remained fairly consistent with the numbers reflected in the 2012 and 2008 elections, but still express deep division.

Perhaps most significantly, Donald Trump won White voters by 21 percentage points, while Hillary Clinton won voters of color by an astounding 80 percentage points (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). While these numbers are consistent with the previous two presidential elections, they reflect an ongoing polarization of voting patterns especially between White voters and voters of color, which can have serious implications on race relations and the ways that people of color might continue to be discriminated against and alter their sense of belonging (Bobo, 2017; Klein, 2020). Indeed, polarization remains present on and off college campuses and has significant ramifications for the future of political engagement in society at large (Klein, 2020).

The election campaign process and the results of the election had a degree of influence on many people. Mental health and well-being metrics from the 2016 election tend to fall along party lines. Those who supported Clinton experienced lower levels of positive emotion and self-esteem, ego-shock, and increased anger and frustration following the results of the election, leading to more out-group hostility (DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Hoyt et al., 2018; McCarthy & Saks, 2019).

Conversely, Republican voters experienced more security (McCarthy & Saks, 2019; Oc et al., 2018). Subjective well-being for those who voted for Clinton decreased following the election results and remained low in the weeks and months following, lasting longer and more sustained than similar effects in previous elections (Lench et al., 2018). Counseling services were more heavily utilized following the election season (McCarthy & Saks, 2019). Many individuals experienced prolonged stress, anxiety, and fear (DeJonckheere et al., 2018) and increased and sustained cortisol levels in the days leading up to and following the election (Hoyt et al., 2018).

Women and people of color have been perhaps most significantly affected by the 2016 election. Increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms in both demographic groups rose following the election season (DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Hoyt et al., 2018; Williams & Medlock, 2017). Rhetoric on campuses reportedly changed following the election in a negative way for marginalized groups. For example, the objectifying rhetoric of the campaign impacted women negatively and the results impacted people's views on the ability of women to succeed in leadership positions (Georgeac et al., 2019; Knuckey, 2019).

The 2016 election had significant effects on students of color. Students of color reported experienced an increase in hateful and racist rhetoric on campus following Election Day, believed to be ignited by the Trump campaign's hateful rhetoric toward minority groups (Lott & Love, 2019; Williams & Medlock, 2018). Those experiences included more microaggressions and acts of overt racism leading to isolation, decreases in sense of belonging, and feeling unsafe on their campuses (Lott & Love, 2019; Williams & Medlock, 2018). Many had a lack of motivation to get assignments done or go to class in the days following the election (DeJonckheere et al., 2018).

It seems the campaign process in 2016 and the election itself may have exacerbated many of the problems students of color already face on college campuses—especially at PWIs—leading to increased negative perceptions of their campus climate and decreases in sense of belonging (Lott & Love, 2019). The ongoing emphasis on diversity poses a perceived threat to White group status and power, which could account for the increase in racialized incidents following the election (Major et al., 2018; Williams & Medlock, 2019). White people, specifically White men, were not as impacted or jarred by the election results. For example, many reported being upset but did not exhibit the same responses or reactions to 2016 as their peers (DeJonckheere et al., 2019), and a majority of White people voted for Trump in the most recent election (Tyson & Maniam, 2016).

In general, the 2016 election was the culmination and embodiment of growing polarization. That polarization already existed before the 2016 election but made itself known and further entrenched people in the division (Klein, 2020). That polarization still existed four years later as then Democratic candidate Joe Biden and President Donald

Trump headed into another campaign season. It is reasonable to consider that these factors could have proved difficult for students of color and other marginalized voices on campuses during the 2020 election process.

In general, while many institutions issued responses to the polarization and results of the 2016 election, calling for unity and highlighting diversity, their responses were reactive in nature and ineffective (Hypolite & Stewart, 2019). It is important to measure how campus climates change during presidential elections and how the elections impact all students, especially students of color, who are already disadvantaged in collegiate settings compared to their White peers (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993).

By studying the 2020 election in real time, the researcher was able to compare the differences in how the election is experienced by both students of color and White students. Doing so built upon existing literature and provided a historical perspective by allowing researchers to understand a specific moment in history on college campuses. It also provided more context and understanding for the 2016 election, examining whether it created lasting effects for elections on college campuses, or if it was simply a fluke. Finally, doing so gave insight and understanding for how higher education professionals can better serve students of color and other marginalized students by creating more hospitable climates and avenues for belonging, especially during particularly tumultuous seasons on campus.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the 2020 U.S. presidential election impacted students' sense of belonging on their college campus and if those experience differed between White students and students of color. The study utilized a qualitative approach. The researcher employed a phenomenological design, utilizing semi-structured interviews with students of color and White students during the weeks leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. This approach allowed participants to express their sense of belonging and feel for the campus climate during the election and allowed for the researcher to analyze the differences in sense of belonging between White students and students of color during the 2020 election.

#### **Qualitative Design**

Using a qualitative phenomenological design allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon of the 2020 presidential election by collecting descriptions of the context and experiences of students of different racial backgrounds. Creswell (2007) explains that researchers “conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” and this is achieved by “talking directly with people ... allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (p. 40). Studying a presidential election on a college campus required an understanding of the full context of the phenomenon beyond what can be grasped from quantitative analysis. This design allowed the researcher to synthesize



“what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58).

Further, conducting phenomenological interviews allowed participants to recount their stories and experiences in fuller, richer ways than by answering survey questions. Qualitative analysis is used to “hear silenced voices ... We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). It is important that participants, particularly participants of color, were allowed to share their own experiences in their own words, and a phenomenological design allowed them to do that in a way that would not reduce them to quantitative data while also allowing the researcher to understand the full context of their experiences. As Creswell (2007) explains, “to level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies” (p. 40).

### **Context**

Interviews were conducted at a small, private, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest region of the United States. The institution is a primarily residential campus with an undergraduate population of close to 2,000 students. It is located in a rural county in a state that traditionally votes for the Republican presidential candidate. The university is a PWI, with White students making up 83% of the population.

Additional context for the year 2020 is necessary in order to understand the scope of the study. In 2020, the world experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically altered many peoples’ ways of life. Those changes, for example, resulted in near-complete shutdowns of restaurants, workplaces, schools, and many other organizations across America in order to slow the spread of the virus. Practicing social-distancing and

wearing protective masks became common practices in many cities, states, and shared spaces. The United States was still in the midst of the pandemic during the election, and COVID-19 has become nearly as polarizing as any other political issue. Participants were attending in-person classes during data collection and were required to wear masks and follow social distancing guidelines while on campus.

In the spring of 2020, massive movements erupted across America in protest of police brutality against Black people and other forms of systemic racism following the shootings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. These protests took place in all fifty states, including the one in which this institution is located. Media coverage of the protests went national, and while a majority of protests were peaceful, incidents of violence heightened tensions further. The events of the summer and the rhetoric surrounding police brutality and Black Lives Matter may have impacted participants, particularly participants of color, as the movement became a very common talking point of both presidential campaigns.

### **Participants**

To obtain participants, the researcher reached out via email and daily student announcements to undergraduate students. Specifically to obtain participants who identify as students of color, the researcher collaborated with diversity officers at the institution to recruit possible participants for the study. There were a total of 20 participants, 10 of whom identified as White and 10 of whom identified as a person of color. Of those 10 participants of color, seven identified as Black (one Black participant also identified as mixed race), two identified as Asian, and one identified as Hispanic.

Ten participants were male and 10 were female. Participants ranged from first-year freshmen to seniors.

### **Procedure**

The researcher used a phenomenological design by conducting semi-structured interviews. An open-ended protocol allowed participants to “describe detailed personal information” and gave the researcher “better control over the types of information received” (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). The researcher created an interview protocol which was piloted with one White participant and one participant of color prior to beginning data collection (Creswell, 2007). All questions were examined by a diversity officer at the institution to make sure that questions were applicable to all participants regardless of race and were respectful of any cultural differences. (See Appendix for the interview protocol.)

Data collection began in mid-October of 2020 to address belonging on campus during the campaign season, and ended Monday, November 2, 2020. All participants remained anonymous. Pseudonym initials were randomly assigned to each participant for ease of discussion in Chapters 4 and 5. White participants and participants of color were asked the same questions to ensure validity between participants. Interviews took between 20 and 55 minutes per participant, and interviews were never cut short in order to ensure that all necessary and relevant data was collected. Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher built rapport with participants, especially with participants of color, given the sensitive nature of self-disclosing sense of belonging and reactions to the election to a White researcher. All interviews were audio recorded, and the interviewer took physical notes during each interview.

## **Data Analysis**

The phenomenological interview approach allowed participants to fully describe their experiences during the 2020 presidential election and the ways it impacted their sense of belonging. For data analysis, the researcher followed Creswell's (2007) recommended steps for qualitative data analysis. After describing the researcher's own interaction with the phenomenon to recognize potential bias and immerse themselves in the research, the researcher read through transcripts and notes to gain a general understanding of participant experiences.

Second, the data were coded for themes. Creswell (2007) describes coding as "reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments" (p. 148). Third, the researcher took those codes and combined them into broader themes that represented the essence of the lived experiences of participants.

Finally, those themes were used to describe what was experienced during the phenomenon and how it was experienced. This is the essence of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data (Creswell, 2007).

## **Benefits**

There are several benefits to this study. First, it adds to the body of research on presidential elections on college campuses and provides a historical perspective on how the 2020 election was experienced in the context of belonging. Second, it allows researchers and professionals to compare the 2020 election to the 2016 election. The 2016 election produced hateful campaign rhetoric and increased political and racial polarization. This study assessed how much this rhetoric remained present in the 2020

election and the degree to which having Trump as a presidential candidate influenced sense of belonging in students at the receiving end of this rhetoric.

This study provides higher education professionals an understanding of how presidential elections impact the belonging of both White students and students of color, which will inform programming and practices to help mitigate potential negative impacts for all students. Those efforts include programming for future elections that can proactively seek to increase sense of belonging during election seasons.

In particular, findings inform how to best serve marginalized students by showing how their sense of belonging is uniquely impacted by presidential elections and how that belonging can be improved. Because this study used a qualitative approach, it allowed students of color to tell their own stories and have their voice fully represented. It served as a means of processing the election process while also providing crucial information for future practice.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach in order to understand the impact of the 2020 U.S. presidential election on students' sense of belonging on campus and the extent to which those experiences differed between White students and students of color. Through the process of transcribing and coding individual interviews, four themes emerged from the data that explain the impact of the 2020 election on sense of belonging, and three themes emerged that explain the differences between White students and students of color.

#### **Impacts of the 2020 Election on Belonging**

The first research question asked, "In what ways, if any, did the 2020 U.S. presidential election impact students' sense of belonging on campus?" Qualitative analysis of interview transcriptions revealed four themes: 1) polarized campus political climate; 2) impact on relationships; 3) inability to be fully understood on campus; and 4) anticipation of post-election responses.

#### ***Polarized Campus Political Climate***

Eighteen out of 20 participants indicated having to navigate a polarized campus political climate. Eight out of 10 White participants and all participants of color identified with this theme. A polarized campus political climate was frequently characterized by "division," "tension," and "chaos." This characterization of their campus climate was often described as a mirror or reflection of the overall political climate of the United

States which, in turn, felt divisive and hostile. This type of campus climate was described negatively as a toxic environment to navigate and a hindrance to participants' overall college experience.

Participants noted this political environment was difficult to navigate as they often felt they were forced to choose one "side" to associate themselves with on both political and social levels. This theme is further detailed by Participant WZ who said,

it's really divisive ... It just divides people. I feel like because it's just like, either the left or you're right. Like, there's no middle. It's just like, you're either with them or against them. And I feel like it just, I don't really like it, because I feel like you can't really associate yourself fully with one or the other. Because I mean, no one's gonna agree 100% with what you feel because they're not you. But then some people think like, if someone says, I'm Republican, they already have like, a view, boom, of what they are. And then it's like, not even like that, you know, like, I believe this and this and that, but I just identify with this, so I just feel like it's very divisive.

This environment reflected an "us versus them" mentality that villainized those on the other side of the political spectrum.

### ***Impact on Relationships***

All participants indicated that the 2020 election had an impact on the creation and maintenance of their friendships. This theme was underscored by two subthemes: the first details the negative impacts of the 2020 election on both the creating and sustaining of relationships, and the second describes the positive impacts of the 2020 election on unifying and strengthening relationships between those with similar or shared beliefs.

**Subtheme 1: Negatively Strained or Ended Relationships.** Fourteen out of 20 participants said the 2020 election had a negative impact on their ability to create or sustain relationships on campus with peers who held different or opposing political beliefs. Six out of 10 White participants and eight out of 10 participants of color identified with this theme. This theme is characterized by an overall increased difficulty in practicing relationship building during the election season.

Friends with opposing political ideologies would avoid talking about politics or avoid each other altogether during the campaign season. Some participants indicated some friendships had such opposing political views that continuing to be friends with the other person was too difficult and the friendship ultimately ended. This theme is articulated by Participant SM, who said,

the climate has also been a little shaken, like the same way it's divisive, like, so many people start to, you know, hold so tight to their beliefs that they will cut off friends, they'll cut off teammates or cut off people that, you know, have always been kind to you prior to the election, but because they have a different view than you, then they, you know, stop talking to you and it's really a toxic thing ... And, yeah, I feel like yeah I have lost a few friends. Yeah, I've known people that, you know, don't talk to me anymore because of my political beliefs.

That theme was further underscored by Participant CE, who talked about her experience with her roommate:

Even my roommate, like we're on total opposite sides of the political spectrum. And like, that's never necessarily been a problem before, because we've been able to just have great discussions about that kind of thing. But now that it's kind of



like, getting down to crunch time, neither one of us is willing to, like, sacrifice, our beliefs. And so it's just, we have been coming to blows a little bit more often, just with regards to that, because you can't ignore it anymore.

Relationships between people with opposing views became strained or uncomfortable around the election season, resulting in diminished depth or increased distance between friends.

**Subtheme 2: Unified or Strengthened Relationships With Similar Beliefs.**

Conversely, 17 out of 20 participants indicated existing relationships with individuals who had similar political views were confirmed and strengthened. Seven out of 10 participants of color and all White participants identified with this subtheme. Friendships and friend groups were unified and strengthened by their shared political beliefs and experiences. Friends with similar views were seen as “safe” people with whom to talk about politics. This theme is again articulated by Participant CE who offered:

I think of like going to people who think the same things as me who I can kind of just like, get out all of my frustrations and my thoughts and stuff without being, without feeling I'm going to be attacked, or that I'm going to be criticized, or that I'm going to have to come up with a counter argument or something like that. And so I definitely have just been able to maintain that both with like people on campus I know who think very similarly to me, and people from home who think very similar to me, and like my parents, and different friends and family and stuff like that. So I've definitely been relying on them more heavily.

Additionally, the election served as a tool to unite and deepen existing friendships between people who shared these experiences and beliefs. This theme is explained by

Participant HK:

I would say it's similar to what I was talking about, like, comfort level, just with my current relationships, like confirming that the ones that are important to me are ones at which the election can be honestly talked about. So I think those I have talked about, like implications of even issues very important to me, like have just kind of confirmed the strength of some relationships.

Those types of relationships allowed for participants to more fully navigate their polarized campus political climate.

### ***Inability to be Understood on Campus***

Eighteen out of 20 participants indicated the 2020 election had a negative impact on their ability to be fully understood by their peers, and they shared such a view through two subthemes. This theme is encapsulated by Participant PA who, while explaining a group activity on campus, explained,

The question was, what words gross you out, like, thick or moist or wet? And like, the person next to me says Democrat ... so [I] keep my thoughts to myself because I don't feel like I myself ... I kind of like have to, like hide a part of me that's not gonna be accepted.

The first sub-theme is characterized by others' negative perceptions of one's character and identity based on one's political beliefs and the second is characterized by a diminished ability to fully express oneself and one's values.

**Subtheme 1: External Perceptions of Character and Identity.** Eighteen out of 20 participants indicated the election impacted the way that others viewed them on campus. Nine out of 10 White participants and participants of color identified with this theme. Participants explained that, on campus, one's politics were associated with one's character and identity. If someone with differing political views learned about one's beliefs, it often led to that person making a negative judgment about the participant's character or personality which was often skewed, incorrect, or incomplete.

Having one's character called into question in this way led participants to feel as though they did not fit in or belong with people who have differing opinions than them.

This politics-based perception of character is described by Participant TL, who said,

as I support Black Lives Matter, I'm seen as a radical first, then I speak my mind as a Black radical woman. That's also a problem. Now I'm too, I'm too opinionated, and emotional. And then you just get labeled all this stuff, and no one wants to listen to that. So you just decided to either get louder, or stop talking.

Similarly, participant MC described his own experience dealing with others' perception of him:

I think a lot of people like start to view me as not so Christian. And I think a lot of others would ... think I'm racist against White people. And then, I think even just like, that I incite violence. Some people have told me that they think I incite violence. So yeah, I think it totally, they view me differently, even in personality. Because I've never been told that before until I started having more of those views ... And then I think in other ways like, I mean, you want to kill babies if you're

voting for a Democratic candidate, and then you're racist if you're voting for a Republican candidate.

In both scenarios, participants reported that others made negative and inaccurate assumptions about their character based on their political beliefs, which in turn impacted their sense of belonging on campus.

**Subtheme 2: Outward Expression of Self and Views.** The second subtheme is closely tied to the first. Fourteen out of 20 participants—eight participants of color and six White participants—indicated they could not fully express themselves or their values on campus during the election. Participants who identified with this theme indicated they feared sharing their political beliefs on campus for fear of being judged or viewed differently based on their beliefs. When participants would share their beliefs, their views were often diluted in order to accommodate those with opposing views and avoid judgment. This led participants to feel on edge on campus, especially when politics entered conversations. Participants often indicated that their political views reflected their values and themselves. This theme was highlighted by Participant HD, who said,

I was really unapologetic about my support for the various movements, Black Lives Matter, stuff like that. Yeah, issues about race, conversations about race. But once I came here, and realized that there were a lot of people who didn't agree with my views—I mean, understand that, you know, that's life. Everybody's not gonna agree with you—but seeing that there were so many people who wasn't on the same side as me. It made me, I began to go into the shell and just keep thoughts and ideas to myself. And limit what I said ... I can't, I can't talk about race. I can't talk about race. I can't talk about how, you know, about how I feel

like [this candidate] is so manipulative. I can't talk about that. I can't talk about his, his—it just goes back to my earlier answer, like, I'm limiting myself. And I feel like with my relationship with anyone, I shouldn't really have to do that.

When unable to fully express their views without fear of judgment, participants could not fully express their character or identity in the ways they desired.

### *Anticipation of Post-Election Responses*

For the fourth and final theme that emerged regarding the first research question, 18 out of 20 participants indicated they anticipated strong post-election responses that could impact the national and campus political climates. Nine White participants and nine participants of color identified with this theme. Participants indicated they anticipated and expected strong reactions to be elicited by others in response to the results of the 2020 election. This anticipation was marked by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty as the results were still unknown when interviews took place.

Participants anticipated these strong reactions could take many forms, all of which were viewed negatively. Anticipated responses included increased name-calling and hostility, loud and chaotic celebrations at the expense of the “losing side,” increased racialized harassment of people of color, protests, rioting, violence, and the denial of the legitimacy of the election results altogether. These responses were expected to further increase division and polarization.

The culmination of the possibility of any and all of these responses led to increased anxiety and fear in participants regarding the livelihood of campus and their own well-being and belonging on both campus and national levels. This anticipation is described by Participant TT:

A lot of supporters will be very, very encouraged to go out and do God knows what around [campus]. There will be probably an aggressive—I think administration will do its best to probably calm tensions—but things are going to get really, really ugly. I think a lot of people will lose friends, a lot of people will lose probably close partners, a lot of people will not want to, you know, take certain classes, I think things will definitely change and not for the better. It'll take a lot. It'll take a lot of really, really good leadership to lift [us] out of that hole.

Ultimately, no correlation existed between participants' political views and their anticipation of responses to election results. One could expect negative responses to either a Biden win or a Trump win, regardless of how the participant voted. Generally, more hostile responses were expected to be elicited by Trump supporters, including the denial of the validity of the election. However, hostility, name-calling, protests, and even rioting were anticipated by individuals on either side of the political spectrum. This anticipation was described by two participants, the first of which was Participant WZ, who said,

I just feel like there'll be tension. Either way, whoever wins, especially like remembering some of the things that the seniors were telling us, and they were like, "it was just like, a zoo." And I'm just like, I don't think I want to know, I don't think I want to go through that.

Participant TL also described this anticipation saying,

Maybe they'll go down to like, the Capitol and just run around the monument we have down there. I don't know. But they're gonna, like, go haywire about it. I already know. They just gonna just have at it. Someone's gonna scream in my

face. This, it's gonna be rough. We're probably gonna go to war, it's gonna be great.

In each of these examples, participants anticipated negative responses to the election which would impact themselves or their community.

While most participants expressed these themes regardless of race, there were also differences between the experience of White students and students of color during the election. Three themes emerged regarding this study's second research question. These themes are presented below.

### **Differences Between White Students and Students of Color**

In attempting to understand the differences in experiences of belonging during the election between White students and students of color, three major themes arose: 1) increased existing struggles with belonging; 2) personal impact of election results; and 3) racialized identity politics. These three themes are characterized by the stark differences in the number of White students versus students of color whose experiences aligned with each theme.

#### ***Magnifying Existing Struggle With Belonging***

Eight out of 10 participants of color identified they already struggled to fully belong on their college campus before the election started, while only one out of ten White participants indicated they struggled to belong on campus. Participants of color indicated they already felt they did not fully belong on campus, and that challenge was an ongoing struggle throughout their college experience. While the election and politics contributed to that struggle, they were not the main reasons for their lowered sense of

belonging. That challenge, in contrast, was often attributed to other social or institutional factors such as attending a predominantly White institution.

As a result, the divisions forged by the 2020 election did not create new issues for these students but magnified existing ones. This experience is described by Participant NB, who said,

I honestly, it's like, you know, me being African American I know I'm a part of the minority here. And a lot of times on campus, I can feel it. You know, it's like, like, a lot of times I do feel like I guess like, like a guest, you know, like this institution, sometimes it feels like ... sometimes it just feels like at this place, the institution chooses a side, you know, and sometimes knowing that that side might not be what I agree with, it does feel like okay, you know, I'm working my way not as an uninvited guest, but somebody who wasn't intentioned to originally supposed to be here ... I've always had a feeling of that, you know, even from freshman year, and the election probably has brought it out a little more. Because like I said, people are choosing sides and being very strong. According to what they—like, it's very open. There's a lot more open now.

As explained by participant NB, many students of color already experienced a lack of belonging on their college campus, and those feelings were amplified as a result of the 2020 presidential election.

### ***Personal Impact of Election Results***

There was a stark contrast between the ways White students and students of color expected election results would personally impact themselves and their families. This theme was underscored by two subthemes with one being the low impact of the election



results for White students and the second being characterized by a direct impact of the results on participants of color and their families.

**Subtheme 1: Recognized Low Impact.** Eight out of 10 White participants recognized the results of the election would have a low impact on themselves and their overall well-being. Only two out of 10 participants of color recognized this low impact. Most White participants recognized that while the election had various impacts on themselves and their college campus, the actual *results* of the election would not impact their belonging or well-being long-term.

At a policy level, most White participants did not anticipate that the election of either candidate would impact themselves or their loved ones. This is identified by Participant FA:

I'm also like, privileged in the sense that I don't have to fear as much as of some consequences of either one candidate or the other getting elected into office, which I realize is definitely something that might affect people of color, vastly different.

Conversely, only two participants of color directly recognized a low impact from the election results. This view is expressed by Participant HC who said, in the context of the election, “not much has changed. I feel like I'm at home as much as I was before the [on-campus] presidential debate viewing or anything ... I probably I don't think it would change drastically.”

**Subtheme 2: Recognized Direct Impact.** Conversely, seven out of ten participants of color indicated they expected the results of the election to have a direct impact on themselves and their immediate family and loved ones, while only two White

participants identified a direct impact. Participants of color anticipated the outcome of the election, depending on which candidate won, would determine policies impacting their livelihood and shaping the rhetoric and culture surrounding those policies. These impacts had both anticipated short-term effects as well as anticipated long-term impacts at a policy level.

For example, a high emphasis was placed on the support or rejection of the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, and the future of immigration law pertaining to the southern border of the U.S. This theme is given context by Participant TT, who said,

Congrats that other people don't feel the need and the urge to vote. But if I don't vote, I feel as though, you know, I will be the beneficiary of some really awful policy. All it takes is a couple people to decide that, you know, a group of people shouldn't have the right to vote or people shouldn't have the right to housing or health care or basic necessities. All it takes is a couple, is a couple people who want to strip rights away from folks that, that it would affect me very, very personally and it wouldn't affect them at all.”

Ultimately, participants of color indicated that their belonging would be impacted more by the policy implications of the election outcome, while White participants generally did not. It should also be noted that both White participants who indicated a direct impact on their lives cited that the election outcome would impact their outlook on the COVID-19 pandemic response, which would impact their own health and that of their loved ones.

### ***Racialized Identity Politics***

The third and final theme presented the starkest difference between White students and students of color. Nine out of ten participants of color indicated that their

specific political views and beliefs were perceived to be tied to their race while zero White participants indicated views and beliefs were perceived to be tied to their race and their politics. Almost all participants of color said others often associated their race with whatever political views they held. This would often be used as a means of minimizing their political beliefs, and in turn, their racial identity and experience. Participant HD describes this in his own experience:

I care about politics. But the things that I care about most, which is race, and race relations and stuff, I feel like it's not political. But to some people it is. And when we turn human rights into political, into something political, that's where, that's where I feel like it's like, then we argue about who's right who's wrong.

Similarly, participants of color reported other students and peers often assumed students of color held certain specific stereotyped political views based on their perceptions of how people of color tend to vote. Participant SM describes this theme well:

That's one thing that like, has really gotten me in this election. Is that, even the last election too, but more so this one, is that everyone's put everyone inside a box. And they say that based on, based on your skin color, you have to think the same way as everyone else, which is just so racist in itself. And it's so destructive. I'm like, wow, like, it has me like ... like someone will say that you have to think some way because of the color of your skin.

For participants of color, racial experiences became a political issue, not just a racial one.

## **Conclusion**

Results from this study indicate the 2020 election had several significant impacts on students' sense of belonging on campus including the navigation of a polarized

campus climate, relationships, ability to be fully seen and understood, and the anticipation of post-election responses. Additionally, findings show White students and students of color experienced aspects of the 2020 election different from one another. These experiences, in particular, differed depending on their existing level of belonging on campus pre-election, how they perceived the election results would personally impact them, and the degree to which their race was politicized and their politics racialized.

The findings presented in these themes require further discussion. These findings deepen our understanding of how elections impact the experiences of college students and college campuses. Further, they carry significant implications for how practitioners approach future election programming and student care for all of their students, especially for their students of color.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This phenomenological study sought to better understand the impacts of the 2020 presidential election on students' experiences of belonging on their college campuses and the differences in those experiences between White students and students of color. The themes that arose are significant and require further elaboration. These findings carry serious weight for how we understand the experiences of all students, but particularly students of color, and for the ways institutions can prepare for future elections on their campuses as well as daily dialogue concerning critical yet contentious matters.

Upon analysis of the results, students' sense of belonging on their college campus was impacted in several ways by the 2020 election. A majority of participants reported their campus climate felt polarized and divided, making it difficult to navigate. College campuses are impacted by the national political climate, a finding which supports the large body of research indicating that sense of belonging is deeply impacted by campus climate (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Mallett et al., 2011; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

In general, students viewed their campus political climate negatively, which has ramifications for their sense of belonging and overall college experience. The polarized nature of the 2020 election made students feel they were forced to pick a side of the political aisle. This did not allow students to think critically and thoughtfully about their beliefs, values, or political views during political discussions. Furthermore, polarization

may leave students feeling ostracized by individuals who do not share the same views and diminish community and relationship development, which are both critical to developing a strong sense of belonging.

Additionally, a campus being polarized does not imply that a campus is politically engaged. Homogenous spaces on campus may find themselves in silos where most students share similar views, taking for granted dissenting or minority voices. Having a campus that is politically polarized, but not politically engaged, could explain why participants found it difficult to navigate their campus political climate and could further marginalize and silence people who fall into a political or racial minority.

The 2020 election also had both positive and negative impacts on students' relationships on campus. That finding then has significant implications for students' belonging, as existing literature shows that building relationships is fundamental to cultivating belonging, both on campus and in life beyond college (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bolger et al., 2000; Mallett et al., 2011). A significant number of participants indicated the election adversely affected their relationships, including experiencing both straining and ending of relationships.

That reality reflects much of the existing literature regarding the negative impacts of elections on student experience (DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Hoyt et al., 2018; McCarthy & Saks, 2019) while also shedding new light on the potential impacts on student relationships. Students need to be able to establish relationships and community to help develop their sense of belonging, and a function of student development should be to help students develop relationships on campus. If elections are causing strained relationships, or are even causing relationships to end, more needs to be done to ensure

that students are approaching politics and civic engagement thoughtfully and with compassion toward one another.

Conversely, some aspects of the election, and even of the polarized campus climate, may allow for students to strengthen relationships with individuals who share similar beliefs. People often associate with individuals who share similar experiences and beliefs (Klein, 2020), and it makes sense that students feel more comfortable sharing their views with people who agree with them politically. To some degree, polarization promotes group affiliation. By “choosing a side,” students may be able to establish relationships along political affiliation.

Further, relationships that were strengthened were marked by a sense of trust and honesty in discussions surrounding politics which, in turn, could prove key to helping mitigate polarization on campus. In general, a polarized political climate is clearly not helpful for developing relationships across campus as it alienates individuals do not share the same views. However, the honesty and trust built within groups could prove helpful when applied programmatically between groups.

Participants also indicated their ability to be fully understood by their peers was impacted by the 2020 election in two key ways. First, participants’ sense of self was impacted when others, often those with opposing political beliefs, made negative character and identity attributions about them based on their political beliefs. Second, many participants indicated they were not comfortable expressing themselves and their political beliefs fully for fear of being judged. While unique, that finding is not entirely surprising. Previous election research suggests elections can foster various negative impacts on well-being and emotional health (DeJonckheere et al., 2018; McCarthy &

Saks, 2019). Research also suggests that elections can be socially isolating for some individuals, particularly for individuals in political and racial minorities (Lott & Love, 2019; Williams & Medlock, 2018).

Being judged for one's political views, and having negative character traits attributed to oneself because of those views, is an isolating experience. It is likely that students refrained from sharing their full political views or identities at least in part in order to avoid social discomfort and isolation. Students need to be able to express themselves fully without fear of judgment in order to challenge, grow, and develop their political beliefs and their identities, as a whole. If elections cause students to feel they cannot be their full, authentic selves, then steps need to be taken to better care for students during elections and to encourage campuses to approach civil discourse with compassion and without ad hominem attacks on character.

Participants also expressed anxiety surrounding the potential impacts of the post-election season on their belonging and overall student experience. Those concerns were largely in regards to the anticipated responses to the election results elicited by other people, both on campus and nationally. This finding tracks with most existing data from the 2016 election, which indicated that most negative impacts of that election occurred in the weeks and months following Election Day (Lench et al., 2018; McCarthy & Saks, 2019). A number of responses were anticipated, ranging from further social division and polarization on campus to incidences of hostility. Students expected some form of negative responses and that those responses would negatively impact their campus and belonging.



Of particular concern among these expected responses is the anticipation of violence from others, which not only impacts social and emotional health but physical health as well. These anticipations in particular are prescient given the events witnessed on January 6, 2021, during which protests became violent and led to an insurrection and siege of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. More research is needed in order to fully understand if students' expectations of post-election responses came to fruition. Still, work can be done to limit further division and hostility on campuses until the public knows the election results.

Students of color were impacted more acutely and directly by the 2020 election than White students. Many participants of color indicated that they already struggled with their sense of belonging on campus, and the 2020 election magnified many of these existing problems. This finding confirms existing research showing students of color face more barriers to their sense of belonging on campus and generally exhibit lower sense of belonging than White students at predominantly White institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hussain & Jones, 2019). These problems are already concerning and knowing that elections can magnify these existing concerns is alarming. Perhaps the magnification of existing problems of belonging is due in part to the ways election campaigns bring to the spotlight policies and issues that already directly impact people of color (e.g., police brutality, immigration). Administrators need to be even more vigilant about these concerns for their students of color during election seasons.

Students of color also indicated they were concerned about the specific policy implications of the election results in addition to the anticipation of post-election responses felt across campus. This finding sheds light on existing research indicating

people of color experience more negative effects from elections than others (Crandall et al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Lott & Love, 2019). Students of color are impacted not only by others' post-election responses but also by the direct policy implications of the election results, which can affect them and their families in more direct ways than White students. When these policies are in the spotlight during an election year, this could lead to more racialized incidences on campuses causing increased racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007), and it may cause students of color to carry more emotional weight around campus than other students.

Almost all participants of color expressed that their political views were perceived to be inextricably tied to race, while no White students expressed this view. Many of these students indicated people assumed they believed certain things or voted certain ways because of their race. That reality plays on stereotypes of how people vote based on their racial background and is likely a unique microaggression that students of color experience, particularly more frequently during the election. Others indicated their personal views on racial topics, such as support for Black Lives Matter, were politicized and subsequently deemed "too political" or "identity politics." In this way, experiences of students of color are made into a political discussion, and the students themselves are not allowed to fully and authentically articulate their views and beliefs nor the motivations behind them. While these experiences are likely not limited to an election season, these experiences are amplified by the election, which is cause for concern knowing the additional impacts the election can have on students regardless of race.

## **Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study carry significant implications for practices within higher education and student affairs. First, student affairs practitioners need to understand college campuses reflect the national climate—if the nation is polarized, so are its college campuses. Election seasons need to be stewarded proactively with comprehensive election programming that both informs students and creates opportunities for dialogue. This study indicates that students felt most comfortable participating in political discussions and disclosing their views with friends they had an established sense of trust with. Programming should emphasize building trust, vulnerability, and honesty between students across the political aisle. Students should fully express themselves and be authentic without the fear of judgment, and programming should work to remove judgment from others and to dissociate peoples' character from their politics.

Second, administrators and faculty alike must know what students of color are experiencing before the election season begins and work to find ways to help navigate campuses that already communicate they do not belong. Practitioners can help students navigate campus through election programming, but programming also needs to include providing students of color with spaces, resources, and faculty that help promote safety and belonging on campus. To overcome polarized campus climates, voices of marginalized students must be both present and heard, while also not subjecting students and faculty to further racial battle fatigue. Election programming should incorporate and collaborate with offices of diversity and inclusion as much as possible. Programming should unpack the nuances of race and politics and focus on the ways White people utilize stereotypes and microaggressions to amalgamate the two. Further, more

educational programming can be done campus-wide to help students understand that election results often impact communities of color more directly than White people and that one's vote does not just impact oneself but also the well-being of those around you.

Third, greater emphasis needs to be placed on helping students and campuses navigate the aftermath of the election. Students enter election seasons with heightened anxieties surrounding the results of the election and how those around them will respond. Implementing programming before, during, and after the election mitigates these anxieties and helps students and campuses discern how they will react and respond to either candidate being elected. Administrators and faculty can encourage students to respond with compassion and grace in either scenario and discourage being a "sore winner" or "sore loser," knowing others around them may be feeling very differently. Administrators can designate specific locations and people post-election as places of safety and belonging for students on either side of the political aisle as they process the impact of the election results.

This study was conducted at a faith-based institution, and findings carry specific implications for educators working at faith-based institutions. Students at faith-based institutions likely have shared values, beliefs, and experiences based upon their religious background and should be able to grow relationships and feel belonging among people who share similar faith traditions. If students at faith-based institutions are experiencing elevated division on their campus, struggle to create relationships, and do not feel fully seen or known by peers despite their shared religious beliefs, more work needs to be done to mitigate these problems and promote belonging.

Programming at faith-based institutions should lean into their religious roots by seeking to find common ground and mutual understanding through their unique faith community. Programming should encourage open, vulnerable, and honest dialogue between students who share religious beliefs but differ in their political views. Often, certain religious beliefs are attributed to one political party on the other, while those on the other side call into question the legitimacy of one's faith. Educators must unpack the complexities of faith and politics and work to dispel these misconceptions and attributions. Educators need to discourage students from doubting the faith experiences of those around them by encouraging active engagement, listening, and suspending of judgment. Doing so may also deepen students' understanding of their own values and of the political parties through which those values are expressed. This process will promote not only political identity development but faith development, as well.

Most importantly, greater care needs to be provided for students of color post-election, as these students are more likely to experience negative effects from the election, both at a social, campus level, but also at a policy, national level. These practices should extend beyond the election season in efforts to change the culture of institutions to be more inclusive for students of color and for students of all political persuasions.

### **Future Research**

This study opens several doors for future research in at least five ways. First, research should continue to focus on elections and their impacts on the student experience. Every election season is different and unique and is subsequently experienced differently and uniquely by students. Studying the similarities and differences between

elections will inform at cultural and historical levels. Election seasons impact the cultural and political climate of the era, and studying them in real time provides unique opportunities to study history in the present as it unfolds. This indicates what direction culturally and politically we are headed at a national level which, in turn, informs and improves student care practices. When we know the history of elections and how they are experienced by students, we can better gauge the trajectory of our campuses and implement programming best suited for the times.

Second, further research should go beyond sense of belonging and look at other aspects of the student experience. Much of the college experience is rooted in establishing a sense of belonging. If belonging is diminished by elections, there are other areas of college life that could be further impacted beyond what is detailed in the findings of the current study, including lower emotional and mental health, academic performance, student satisfaction, and even more serious and long-term aspects such as student safety, retention and persistence, and even graduation rates. While alarming, these impacts could provide opportunities for collaboration with other departments like campus counseling centers and academic support personnel to ensure students have a strong support network as they navigate the challenges of an election on campus. Studying these topics will give practitioners a more thorough and complete view of the scope in which elections impact their students and provide opportunity to create new supports where they are needed.

Third, data needs to be collected before and after the election. Students indicated their belonging would be impacted by changes in their campus climate post-election. Conducting research with a pre- and post-test design will allow practitioners to

understand the impacts of the campaign season leading up to election day as well as the impacts of the election results and their aftermath. This knowledge will inform how practitioners steward programming and student care before and after the election, as support for students during elections looks differently at different stages in the election process. Further research in this regard will indicate what needs to be emphasized before the election and what needs to be emphasized afterward. For example, pre-election programming may focus on education and information; post-election programming may focus more heavily on humility and compassion across the aisle. Additionally, conducting research pre- and post-election will indicate whether greater emphasis needs to be placed on pre-election or post-election programming. If students struggle with belonging more heavily after the election results, then institutions may need to focus more on the aftermath of the election rather than the build-up toward it.

Fourth, further research should look at the differences in experiences between Black, Indigenous, Latino/a, and Asian students rather than lumping them into one students of color category. Comparing the experiences of students of color to White students is a helpful framework, but students of color are not a monolith. Students from different racial and cultural backgrounds bring different experiences to the table and experience their campuses differently from one another. Students from different racial backgrounds may also experience elections differently, or more directly, than others. Expanding beyond the students of color language will allow students to communicate their experiences more wholly and will help student support personnel to more deeply understand the nuances of race and the experiences their students bring to the table. Looking at the distinct and unique experiences of different racial groups can inform the

unique student care needed to help all students of color thrive during election seasons and during their entire college experience.

Fifth, research can further examine the differences in experience along political party affiliation. Campuses experience polarization like the rest of the nation, and students find themselves pushed toward opposite ends of the political spectrum. Students may experience elections differently depending on their political party affiliation and the political context of their institution and the region they live in. If a student identifies as a political minority at an institution, their experience during the election may be more negative compared to students in the political majority. Students in the political minority may require more care and attention. Student experiences during elections may also differ depending on whether one's chosen candidate won or lost the election. If a student's candidate wins the election, they may feel a sense of security on campus while other students may feel isolated and even hostility. Students on different sides of the political aisle require different kinds and levels of care and attention depending on the political context of the institution. Further research will allow administrators and practitioners to understand how students are feeling during an election based on their political views. Further, if researchers are able to understand what creates good experience for students on both sides of the political spectrum, this research may provide insight on ways to transcend political tension and polarization on campus.

### **Limitations**

This study had at least three limitations. First, this study was conducted at one small institution that typically leans conservative and is located in a conservative state. Thus, the findings may not be completely representative of students at other institutions.



A majority of participants in this study indicated that they planned to vote for Biden, which could skew experiences and findings. Biden voters may have felt more marginalized or isolated at a private, conservative institution in the Midwest in comparison to other schools in other regions. However, voting is not indicative of party affiliation, and participants were not asked to directly identify their political party.

Students at larger, public institutions may have experienced the 2020 election differently for a number of reasons, including the nature of the community at their institution or the political leanings of both the student body and the institution itself. Students who attend school in a swing state or in a state that Biden won may have also had different experiences during the 2020 election, especially if there were more like-minded students to interact with. Larger schools may have had more robust election programming; conversely, public schools may have had a less engaged student body.

Second, there were not enough participants from each racial identity group to adequately draw distinctions in experience between racial groups within the students of color group. The scope of the study did not allow for the researcher to interview an equal number of Black, Latino/a, and Asian-Pacific Islander students to examine the differences between each racial group and compare them to the experiences of White students. Participants within the students of color group likely had different experiences from one another based on their racial background, but those differences could not be identified in full due to a lack of robust and saturated representation from every racial background. Further, the students of color participant group was over-representative of Black students on campus compared to other racial minorities. While the students of color participant group is representative of the generalized experiences of students of

color on a predominantly White campus, findings may be more representative of Black students than students of other racial backgrounds. Broader distinctions were drawn between students of color and White students, but findings did not indicate distinctions between racial minority students on campus.

Third, interviews were only conducted in the days and weeks leading up to the election and not post-election. Students experience the impacts of the election both before and after Election Day and in different ways depending on their background and on the results of the election. Conducting interviews after Election Day would have provided more holistic insight into how elections impact sense of belonging on campus and the differences in impact on belonging before and after the election. However, the scope of this study did not allow for the researcher to conduct second interviews with participants after the election had concluded. Findings can only speak to experiences of belonging during the election campaign season, not after the results of the election were public knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The 2020 U.S. presidential election had significant impact on students' sense of belonging on campus and had a distinct and acute impact on students of color compared to White students. Students had to navigate a complex, divided, and polarized campus climate; their relationships were impacted by the election. Their character was often called into question based on their political views, and students struggled to fully express themselves through their political views; they anticipated strong reactions and responses from those around them post-election. Further, students of color faced additional concerns, marked by a magnification of existing issues with belonging, an anticipation of

direct policy impacts on themselves and their loved ones based on the election results, and an external amalgamation of their race and their political views.

Elections have the potential to impact students' sense of belonging on their college campuses as well as many other factors contributing to their overall student experience. That reality should raise concern and has serious implications for how student affairs professionals practice care during presidential elections. At the same time, elections also provide avenues for growth and development and are opportunities for student care and support. Nationally, campuses and students find themselves at a pivotal crossroads: Continue down the current path of division and in-group political tribalism or pave a new path forward—one balancing compassion and conviction in our political discourse and relationship building (Giboney et al., 2020). Programming must focus on establishing belonging for all students, especially students of color, during the election and beyond. Colleges and universities must transcend the current era of national political polarization in the hope of creating vibrant and engaging spaces for students to belong. If the current study is any indication, the work ahead is arduous and difficult, but necessary.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

1. How involved do you feel you are in this election? In politics, in general?
2. When you think of the 2020 election, what, if anything, comes to mind?
3. What impact, if any, has the election had on the campus climate?
4. In what way(s), if any, has the election affected your sense of belonging on campus? If so, how?
5. Do you feel the election has affected your ability to create and/or sustain relationships on campus? If so, how?
6. Do you feel your sense of emotional safety has been impacted by the election? If so, in what way(s)?
7. Do you feel your sense of physical safety has been impacted by the election? If so, in what way(s)?
8. Do you feel comfortable sharing your political views or beliefs on campus? Why or why not?
9. Do you think people view you differently as a result of your political views or beliefs? In what ways?
10. When thinking about the election, in what way(s), if any, has your race impacted your sense of belonging on campus?
11. How, if at all, will you react if Biden wins? If Trump wins?
12. How, if at all, do you think the campus climate will change if Biden wins? Trump wins?
13. In what ways, if any, do you think the election results will affect your sense of belonging on campus?

